

## The American Press in World War I Part 2



Floyd Gibbons, following his injuries in June, 1918

What follows are my notes taken from Crozier, Emmet. *American Reporters on the Western Front, 1914-1918*. 1959. New York; Oxford University Press. Any inaccuracies are my responsibility. I have tried to summarize some of the points in Crozier's work for my readers. The book is no longer in print and is difficult to find.

The press was heavily censored in WWI. In fact, the British originally intended to have no press near the battlefield, and to inform the public strictly through military communiques. The French were not much better. Their attempts to black out the press at first failed. What followed was a process of credentialing journalists, limited the number allowed to report on the war, and censoring every dispatch before publication.

One of the first and most colorful American journalists to venture to France in 1917 was Floyd Gibbons. Gibbons cancelled his original booking on the ship carrying the discredited German ambassador home after he was expelled from the US, wishing to be on a ship more likely to be engaged by German submarines.

Indeed, the *Laconia*, upon which he rode, was torpedoed, and Crozier described Gibbons as being “cheerful and busy” as he helped the crew of the lifeboat in which he rode away from the crippled ship. His article about the attack presented a virtual ultimatum to President Wilson. War was declared six weeks later.

Gibbons wasn't the first American journalist to report on the war. There were a number who had reported on it since 1914. But he was the first new group, and a very “activist” reporter, with great influence through his work with the *Chicago Tribune*. One of the most experienced American war correspondents of the era was Frederick Palmer. He had reported on the war from the start and was accredited by the three American press services. He became a confidante of General Pershing and accompanied the General and his staff when they crossed the Atlantic on the S.S. *Baltic*. Palmer accepted a commission as a major in the U.S. Army, and ran the press section of G-2 (known as G-2-D). Within the American General Staff, G-2 was the intelligence branch. The Press Section was a subunit of G-2.

In the early days of American involvement in the war, General Pershing and Palmer intended there to be no more than twelve American correspondents. Palmer assembled his staff, including a number of censors. In the meantime, journalists competed for position and credentials. Some of the correspondents included: Charles Grasty from the *New York Times*, Philip Powers from the A.P., Wilbur Forrest from the United Press, Heywood Broun from the *New York Tribune*, Daniel Dillon from the Hearst organization, C.C. Lyon of the Newspaper Enterprise Association and the United Press, Paul Mowrer and Junius Wood from the *Chicago Daily News*, Lincoln Eyre of the *New York Morning World*, J. Westbrook Pegler for the United Press, Robert Small with the Associated Press, Raymond Carroll of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Herbert Corey, Reginald Wright Kauffman, Wythe Williams of the *New York Times*.

Reporters weren't the only members of the journalism community on the ground in France. Major Robert McCormick, the publisher and part owner of the *Chicago Tribune* had come to France to command an artillery battery with the First Division.

Palmer and his boss, Colonel Dennis Nolan (the head of American Intelligence—G-2) decided to accredit only a few journalists. These men (women were excluded) would wear a U.S. Army officer's uniform with Sam Browne belt. They would wear a green arm band sporting the letter 'C'. They would not be required to

salute others but were authorized to return salutes. By July 1917, twenty correspondents were decked out in their new attire.

The accredited correspondents created animosity among regular army officers, especially their carousing in Paris. Palmer moved his press headquarters out of Paris. When they left, the accredited correspondents were advised to bring with them:

1. Telegraph credit cards
2. A small camera
3. A map
4. Typewriter and plenty of copy paper, carbons, writing paper
5. Plenty of tobacco, cigars, cigarettes
6. A small rubber bath tub.

In late July of 1917, G-2-D press headquarters moved from 31 rue de Constantine in Paris to Neufchâteau, far to the east of Paris. They were put up in the Hotel de la Providence. That this was more than an hour from AEF Headquarters in Chaumont and an hour away from the main AEF training area was no accident—Pershing didn't want them too close.

Gibbons and Broun soon left for Paris and other locations after becoming bored with the routine in Neufchâteau, though the accommodations were quite nice. Some who stayed in Paris were called "Parisites".

The matter of how to get information to the press was quite fluid in the 1917. Only Gibbons and Junius Wood knew Pershing well enough to be comfortable in his presence. They had gotten to know him during the Mexican Border conflict the year before. Pershing's relationship with other reporters could be considered "icy". It was during this time that the only foray by a female journalist hit the papers, under the byline: "Peggy". She described her time in a training camp in a chatty style in the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, triggering the ire of the accredited correspondents in Neufchâteau.

"Peggy" was Henrietta Hull, who had worked for the *El Paso Morning Times*. She had followed American forces during the Mexican Border dispute and had gotten to know General Pershing during that time. Major McCormick had met her and was her connection to the Paris edition of the *Tribune*. Major McCormick's battery was located in the training camp she reported about. The whole affair is described between pages 151 and 156 of Crozier's

book. Mrs. Hull went back to Paris. Later, she returned to the US to seek formal accreditation.

The press corps was dominated by men who did not countenance the presence of women among them. It was a “men’s club”. They competed for stories and went to great lengths to get “scoops”. They bribed telegraph operators to get their stories out ahead of others. They chafed against the limitations, regulations, and censorship General Pershing’s staff imposed upon them. The competitive spirit grew more pointed as American troops moved to the front in the winter of 1917 and early spring of 1918. The correspondents were not allowed to name the units they reported on, names of officers and men, the location of the units, or whether they were Army, National Army (draftee divisions), National Guard, or Marines. About all they could say was: “Somewhere in France, with the American Expeditionary Forces . . .”

Major Palmer left G-2-D in the fall of 1917 to do a variety of other duties. Crozier stated that Palmer “failed to understand the brash, restless generation of journalists 1917 had brought to the war scene.” During that time the correspondents continued to grate under censorship, and at the same time witnessed the incompetence of American and French military leadership. Americans were dying of pneumonia and other illnesses in training camps with inadequate facilities. One said, “Our (military) staff is viciously incompetent and is covering up the incompetence which is may suspect by a huge pretense of desk-slamming and cursing.” Pershing’s staff tried to clamp down with censorship. However, correspondents began to figure out ways to circumvent it, and uncensored reports found their way into American papers, causing more problems. For example, journalist Reginald Wright Kauffman corresponded with Theodore Roosevelt, who then sent rewritten versions to a journalist at the *Philadelphia North American* for publication. Intelligence agents trailed Kauffman, who nevertheless continued his activity. Heywood Broun even went as far as telling Lieutenants Green and Viskniskki, two of the Paris-based censors, about his mailing of articles without submitting them to censorship.

For their efforts to report the incompetence of the with which the supply chain was being run, Pegler was declared persona nongrata, Kauffman lost his credentials, and Broun was suspended and fined.

Journalists on the American side of the Atlantic lobbied congress to loosen the reins as embarrassing reports hit the papers. Some divisions were regional, for example the “Yankee Division” of

New Englanders. Frank Sibley of the *Boston Globe* lobbied to report on this division and was refused for months. Finally, Pershing's chief of staff, Col. James Harbord allowed it, and began to reset some of the contention. Over the winter, the press restrictions and censorship loosened a bit. George Creel and the Committee on Public Information continually pressured Secretary of War Baker and Congress on the matter.

Colonel W.C. Sweeney became the head of G-2-D and Major E.R.W. McCabe became the chief field officer for it in Neufchâteau.

The German offensive in the spring of 1918 kicked off in the north on March 31st, 1918. At the same time, the German "Paris Gun", which some mistakenly called "Big Bertha" opened up and rained terror on Paris. Reporter Wilbur Forrest made fantastical claims about it shooting a rocket propelled projectile at the time. One shell hit Easter worshippers at a Paris church, killing 91 and wounding 68. At the same time, German *Gotha* bombers began night raids, blacking out the City of Light. The French initially tried to black out the press on the matter, but the events were too well known for that to be sustained. Parisians fled, nearly a million.

The Paris headquarters for G-2-D was at 10 rue Ste. Anne. About 8 blocks away was the New York Bar, a popular press hang out.

As the German spring offensive moved forward, the AEF finally started providing the press with daily communiques. These were usually issued at 9 p.m. The AEF First Division went into the attack on May 28th, and the press rushed north toward the action. Some reporters were eager to be at the front, with the troops. Jimmy Hopper, from *Collier's Weekly* went into Cantigny during the action, and ended up rounding up a group of surrendering Germans. For a few days, all the stories back home were about Cantigny.

On May 31st, the AEF 2nd Division was turned over to French command and rushed headlong toward Chateau-Thierry, where German forces breeched French lines, threatening Paris. The Second Battle of the Marne was on, and the outcome of the war suddenly seemed to turn. Four journalists caught wind of the affair and rushed toward the uncertain front. Over the next several days, other journalists learned of the action and demanded their piece of the reporting, and Lt. Col. McCabe negotiated a means by which most could be satisfied.

The initial word from the Chateau-Thierry front was that American forces had stopped the German advance cold and saved Paris. Historians argue the latter point, but that was what the AEF told the reporters, and what they, in turn, told the world. In the meantime, the press headquarters was moved to 10 rue Ste. Anne in Paris from Neufchâteau, to be closer to the action. The main thing correspondents at the time remembered was that this battle mattered, more than anything they had reported on before. But, they were swept up in events, and were overzealous in their interpretation of events.

Early in the battle, the key role of the 4th Brigade of U.S. Marines came to the forefront. Reporters were frustrated about the limitations the AEF put on identifying units as being anything other than *forces of the AEF*. But, the Marines were a separate service branch, like the Navy. They appealed to the AEF, and after consideration, Colonel Sweeney informed them that they could identify the Marines as such. For the next three weeks, the Marines dominated the front pages during the Battle of Belleau Wood.

When the Marines went on the offensive on June 6th it appears that the press knew more about the proposed offensive than the Marines according to Crozier's book. Reporters rushed to the scene. According to Marine accounts, the men of the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments heard about their part in the battle with less than one and a half hours notice; it took the reporters at least two hours to make it from Paris to the front from Paris. Further, it appears that the reporters were briefed about the upcoming battle. Floyd Gibbons, for example, wrote a report based on those briefings and gave it to a friend for safe keeping. It was a typical flamboyant Gibbons story, exciting and, ultimately, fiction.

Gibbons and his Army 'conducting officer, Lt. Arthur Hartzell, rushed to the front. They drove to Lucy-le-Bocage, and then ran to meet up with Major Benjamin Berry, commanding the Third Battalion of the Fifth Marine Regiment. They followed the Marines into a wheat field where the Third of the Fifth ceased to exist as a functional unit. Most of the Marines were killed or wounded in the open field. Gibbons was first shot through his left upper arm. While lying on the ground another bullet, probably a ricochet, passed through his left eye and out the skull above it, leaving Gibbons unconscious, with his eye hanging by a thread. Gibbons regained consciousness, but he and Hartzell were pinned down. A long while later, Hartzell was able to get Gibbons out of the field. From there, he was evacuated by ambulance to the American Red Cross Hospital Number One in Neuilly-sur-Seine,

in the northwestern suburbs of Paris. He survived his wounds and returned to the field a month later.

The flood of correspondents hungry for stories became such a problem that General Pershing wrote an order limiting the press corps to 25 accredited correspondents. Because of the interest in specific divisions, he permitted one correspondent to each division, and allowed freer reporting on them.

Floyd Gibbons didn't return to the battlefield. In late July he sailed back to the US. After his return, he went on a lecture circuit and wrote a book about his experiences.

Resources:

The photo of journalist Floyd Gibbons following his wounds, and his award of the Croix de Guerre was accessed on 1/9/2017 on: <http://spartacus-educational.com/Jgibbons.htm>. The original appeared in Gibbons' book below.

Crozier, Emmet. *American Reporters on the Western Front, 1914-1918*. 1959. New York; Oxford University Press.

Gibbons, Floyd. *And They Thought We Wouldn't Fight*. 1918. New York; George H. Doran Company.